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# 'I Am Rohingya': A Pedagogical Study on the Roles of Ethnographic Theatre for a Refugee Youth Population

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**'I AM ROHINGYA': A PEDAGOGICAL STUDY ON THE ROLES OF  
ETHNOGRAPHIC THEATRE FOR A REFUGEE YOUTH POPULATION**

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May this paper serve as a reminder to the Burmese government, to the international community, and to the millions of Rohingyas suffering right now – we hear you, we feel you, and we will not forget you.

## **1.0 - Introduction**

If you ask the average Canadian about refugee populations in the country, they are unlikely to know much, if anything, about the Rohingya people. Their story and their struggle have rarely made it into the mainstream news and so they remain in the shadows of the Canadian social, political and media landscape. Rohingya people are the Muslim minority of Burma, or Myanmar<sup>1</sup>, that mainly reside in the Northern Arakan state. Since 1978, Rohingyas have been subject to state-sponsored genocide and ethnic cleansing by the Buddhist majority, Burmese government (Zarni, Cowley, 685). Rohingyas have been denied basic human rights such as the right to travel, work, marry, and the right to life. When asked about all of this violence, Myanmar's president Thein Sein clearly denied the existence of Rohingyas saying "There are no Rohingya in Burma" (End Genocide). As a result, Rohingya Muslims have become known as "the most persecuted people on Earth" (Economist). Many Rohingyas have fled to neighbouring countries such as Bangladesh and Thailand to seek refuge, either by boat or more treacherously on foot. Other Rohingyas have travelled as far as Canada in hopes to start a new life for their families and to be safe from violence and persecution; however, resettlement in a new country comes with its own challenges and struggles.

Based on estimates from community leaders, a group of almost 200 Rohingya Muslims have settled in diasporic communities in Kitchener-Waterloo. In the summer of 2015 I had the chance to meet a group of Rohingya refugee youth, who ranged in age from 8 to 22, from Kitchener -Waterloo while working with a community-based organization: Muslim Social Services (MSS). I was given the task of organizing a series of programming for the Rohingya

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<sup>1</sup> Under British colonial rule, Burma became the country's official name and remained after independence. In 1988, Burma's ruling junta passed an "Adaptation of Expressions Law" that aimed to replace the country's Anglicized place names with words from Burmese language. Burma became replaced by Myanmar. This is still a contentious issue today. (Schiavenza)

youth community to help serve the needs of their community, aided by funding and resources from MSS. I organized a meet-up with Rohingya youth in the community based on contacts from MSS. At this meet-up were several Rohingya youth members ranging from various ages who decided to come out of curiosity. When we all finally and got to know each other briefly, I asked what kind of programming they wanted to do with the support of MSS. All of the youth shared the same interest in wanting the chance to share their personal stories of struggle and who they are. They wanted people to know about the situation facing the Rohingyas in Burma and in Canada as it is often an issue that is left out of mainstream media. One of the youth members in the group suggested doing a stage play to showcase these stories in a more creative way. Everyone was very excited at this idea, and unanimously we decided to collaboratively put together a stage play to showcase the refugee experience and the hardships of the Rohingya people. Over a span of 9 months the youth and I met almost every weekend at a local community centre to determine what story we were going to tell, whose voices would be involved, and what outcome we wanted from the play. We table read the script, and revised it according to criticisms and feedback from the youth participants and then embarked on a weekly rehearsal process.

My primary research question for this study asks: What kind of roles can ethnographic theatre perform for marginalized/refugee youth living in Canada? It is important to note the ethnographic element of this project is linked directly to the creation of the script and the play, where I undertook an informal ethnography. Their stories and narratives were compiled by myself into a theatre play which I refer to as an Ethnographic Theatre piece. However, the ethnographic script process is only a background to this study, my main focus is on the different ways this project has impacted the youth themselves. The kinds of roles with ethnographic theatre that I originally planned to examine were as follows: a) as a form of public pedagogy; b)

as a practice of memory and testimony; c) as a way to assert political voice and agency; and d) as a form of negotiating identity in refugee diasporas. However, after having completed the project and conducted interviews with each of the youth, I have amended my original areas of focus to the following: a) personal agency, b) constructing identity and counterstories, and c) critical public pedagogy and activism. These amendments follow from the data I collected which pointed to this more focused trajectory and allow for a more detailed analysis of the impact of ethnographic theatre on the lives of these youth. This study draws on existing theories and methods on performed ethnography and ethnographic theatre in order to understand the transformative and pedagogic role ethnographic theatre can play in working with marginalized communities - with respect to personal, social, cultural and political outcomes. My hope for this study is for its potential replication and use as a model for other marginalized groups including but not limited to refugee communities.

Ethnographic theatre combines anthropological research data with creative editing and fictional writing by the playwright (Lucas, 1) – in this the oral narratives of the youth served as the anthropological data. The choice to do an ethnographic theatre piece came from the writing process, where having the youth write the script was taking too long and did not seem to be an efficient use of time given the urgency with which they wanted to have their story told. Without taking up too much space and with the permission of the youth, I decided to construct this play as an ethnographic theatre piece based on the stories they had shared. I realized this would be a more productive and ethical method to shape this play into an entertaining and truthful piece of theatre. After weeks of the youth sharing their stories and personal anecdotes, I compiled them into a four-act stage play called “I Am Rohingya”. The play follows a linear timeline of the Rohingya refugee experience going from life before the violence, during the genocide, escaping

the country, moving to a refugee camp, and finally resettling in Canada. The play revolves around a new narrator in each act who takes the audience through the journey of a Rohingya refugee, while a reenactment of those events takes place. “I Am Rohingya” is a powerful collaborative testimony of life, death, trauma, genocide, migration, and hope - all told from the perspective of Rohingya refugee youth. The script merely served as a guiding tool for the actors, and it was fluid and constantly in flux depending on the youth’s feelings towards the scenes and dialogue and new ideas that emerged during rehearsals – major changes were even made to the play two weeks prior to the opening night that were not in the script.

The play debuted on April 9th, 2016 where a sold out venue of approximately 500 community members came to watch the show. The show ended with a standing ovation for the youth and a Q&A session for the audience to ask the cast questions. The performance was covered by several media outlets including CBC and even Rohingya VisionTV, a news organization based in Burma. The show continues to be seen today at various venues, now branching outside of Kitchener-Waterloo and will be performed in Toronto as part of a fundraising benefit for Rohingya relief efforts. Since I have chosen to do the creative MRP option, I felt the play would not allow enough in-depth analysis to fully engage with this issue. So as an extension of this project, I am developing a feature-length documentary on Rohingya refugees living in Canada and their efforts to put on a play about their people. The film will document the rehearsal process and engage the youth in interviews about some of the struggles they face growing up as refugees in Canada, as well as shed a spotlight on the genocide.

## **2.0 - Context to the Rohingya Genocide**

Over the past thirty-five years, the State of Burma has engaged in a strategic, formulated, and effective plan to destroy the Rohingya people (Zarni, Cowley, 682). This has resulted in a

frontal assault on the Rohingya culture, language, identity, and their Islamic religion. ‘Rohingya’ is an ethno-religious term meaning Muslim people whose ancestral home is Arakan or Rakhine in Myanmar (Zarni, Cowley, 683). The total current number of Rohingya in the Rakhine State are estimated at over one million, the vast majority of whom are rapidly becoming stateless (Zarni, Cowley, 683-4). Their ancestral roots lie along the postcolonial borders of the British rule, where many fled India and went to Burma to seek employment opportunities. Their identity as an ethnolinguistic group became recognized by the Burmese regime after independence in 1948 but was then systematically erased by the anti-Muslim military-controlled governments in place since 1962 (Zarni, Cowley, 683). In Myanmar’s state media, official documents and even school textbooks refer to the Rohingya as illegal economic Bengali migrants from colonial time that are “a racist local reference” and a “threat to national security” - all claims that the majority of the Burmese population have accepted as fact over the past five decades (Zarni, Cowley, 683).

The State and the predominantly Buddhist society have joined forces with the intention of destroying, deindigenizing, and dehumanizing the Rohingya people whose ancestral home is Burma (Zarni, Cowley, 683). The evidence of what can only be described as genocide or ethnic cleansing are part of organized violent massacres on Rohingya people. The assault on their identity, mental and emotional harm are the by-products of deliberate efforts to create the conditions that would bring about the group’s destruction, including measures to prevent births. This has all occurred over the past thirty-five years and has been carried out by the anti-Muslim ultra-nationalists among the Buddhist peoples (Zarni, Cowley, 683). My use of the identification ‘genocide’ and ‘ethnic cleansing’ is a result of all the conditions previously mentioned, but also based on the definition of genocide found in Article 2 of the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide:

“[A]ny of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such: (a) Killing members of the group; (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group. (OAS)”

Since the violence of 2012, over 140,000 Rohingya Muslims remain displaced in seventy-six concentrated camps across Burma (Human Rights Watch). Most Rohingyas to this date have fled to neighbouring countries such as Bangladesh and Thailand to seek refuge in camps, either by boat or more treacherously on foot - many of which did not survive the long trek or the high seas. The refugee camps are also sometimes unlivable given the absence of clean resources, and the presence of corruption, and anti-immigration sentiment from the country's locals.

Approximately over 36,000 Rohingya and other Muslims in communities across the Rakhine State are considered by the United Nations to be “acutely vulnerable and in need of urgent humanitarian assistance. (Zarni, Cowley, 684)” Rohingyas have travelled as far as Canada in hopes to start a new life for their families and be safe from violence and persecution; however, resettlement in a new country can come with its own challenges and struggles.

### **3.0 – Positionality**

While this project is premised on the youth creating the play themselves and telling their story autonomously, it is important to position myself as both the researcher, facilitator, and creative director in the room. Being aware of my social location and privilege was essential in order to avoid taking up too much space. My presence within this group means that I bring a great deal of privilege and hierarchy, both of which I attempted to conceal as much as possible. However, playing the role of the director and co-writer, I often found it difficult to make my privileged hierarchal position in the group invisible – I encountered this in moments of directing the group, deciding the order of rehearsals, and dictating who was cast as certain roles. While my

identity as a Sunni-Muslim from a similar ethnocultural background that is rooted partially in South Asia, helps give me access to this community and builds a sense of camaraderie, the fact is that I come from a higher socio-economic background, I am Canadian born, and I am currently conducting this project through the institutional site of the university. Therefore, I automatically bring along a cultural, socio-economic, and institutional sense of power and privilege. Moreover, I am the writer and director of the play which means I have a certain amount of discursive power with which to craft and represent their story. While the process is collaborative, in the end I still make many of the creative decisions which are sometimes challenged, but mostly receive the group's consent. My background is in professional acting and theatre, so I am seen as an 'expert' which brings along with it a certain power and responsibility to represent their lives authentically.

Being the eldest in the group also comes with its own power and privilege. Interestingly enough, the eldest Rohingya youth who is closer to my age was often the one to challenge me the most on my creative decisions. There have sometimes been experiences of tension between me and the group. This tension comes in when I try to create a platform for their voice and experiences, but also try to maintain the creative license of the play. For example, many of the youth in the play would tell me all of the excruciating details of their journey that they want to include in the story, such as the laborious process of filling out refugee claim forms. Taking note of this, my job as director in an ethnographic theatre piece is to try and tell an engaging story for the audience while still informing them of the realities of the refugee experience. At times I felt those details did not make for engaging theatre and might seem unnecessary or boring to the audience, such as the refugee application process. This may have not been the most authentic way to engage in ethnographic theatre with a marginalized community, and upon reflection it

would be interesting to do this project again completely unadulterated by my input and compare the two experiences. This is where the tension came in and where I sought a balance between my creative license and their authentic experiences. Between the parent's oral narratives being transferred to the youth and my ethnographic writing process of the script, this story has gone through multiple filters. Since the more 'sensational' moments of the Rohingya experience were chosen to tell this story, the play could not be a mirror into the reality of a Rohingya refugee, as much of that experience is the waiting process. Rather the play serves as a small glimpse into the more treacherous and arduous moments in the life of a Rohingya refugee in order to focus the conversation on more pressing issues such as genocide and forced migration.

Nonetheless I view my role in this process as that of an ally working in solidarity with the Rohingya participants in the collaborative mode of storytelling. I am not trying to speak *for* the group, but rather speak *with* them. There were moments where the youth would ask me to play a certain character in the play, which I was against. While I saw the invitation as incredibly heart-warming and interpreted it to be an invitation into their story, I preferred not to take up any space on the stage; but, again, the choice to go against their wishes is another example of my power in relation to theirs. In my view, the stage is a sacred place where stories and memories can come to life. For me to step on that stage as a player would seem out of place and could potentially change my role as an ally. Additionally, this project was not about me trying to rescue 'the other' or engage in a self-gratifying saviour complex, rather it was about working collaboratively and in alliance every step of the way to ensure that the youth's story was told with as much authenticity as possible.

## **4.0 - Literature Review**

### **4.1 – Ethnographic Theatre and Performed Ethnography**

Ethnographic theatre is the marriage between ethnographic research techniques and the medium of performance to confront dominant hegemonic narratives that can range from history, culture, and identity (Lucas, 3). However, it must be made very clear that ethnographic theatre practitioners do not practice ethnography in a formal sense. Techniques are drawn upon which and applied to the artistic medium of theatre to make claims about the group portrayed on stage (Lucas, 3). “Hence, these playwrights and performers do work which is *ethnographic* in nature, but the product of their work is not an *ethnography* (Lucas, 3).” I constitute the play “I Am Rohingya” as a piece of ethnographic theatre due to the Rohingya youth’s oral narratives that formulate the script and the play and are heavy reliant on what they believe to be the story of their people. In formal ethnography where the research data is based on methods such as transcripts from interviews and focus groups, our ethnographic theatre piece uses written and oral narratives from the youth and employs traditional theatre techniques to create an alternative form of knowledge and pedagogy.

To qualify our play as an ethnographic theatre piece, Ashley Elizabeth Lucas outlines three defining traits that define a play as ethnographic theatre. An ethnographic theatre play must emanate from ethnographic data (such as interviews or participant observation), it must use non-naturalistic staging to allow actors to move quickly through a variety of characters and settings, and the practitioners must be accountable to the communities they represent (Lucas, 6). Our play “I Am Rohingya” employs all three of these traits as the show is based on focus groups with the Rohingya youth, the whole format of the show is a timeline including multiple locations and characters, and my work with the group constantly involved me checking in with the youth’s

parents and Rohingya community members to make sure the story and the production was being done authentically.

Ethnography, or what Tara Goldstein calls “performed ethnography,” is the basis and methodological undercurrent of my research study (Goldstein, 311). Goldstein offers an article and case study of one of the closest examples to my research study I have come across, called “Hong Kong Canada: Performed Ethnography for Anti-Racist Teacher Education.” She explores the pedagogical possibilities of “performed ethnography” in order to improve anti-racist teaching. She discusses the political and ethical challenges that arise from her social location as a White, Canadian-born researcher working with immigrant children from Hong Kong. The ethnographically informed play that emerged from her ethnographic research in Canadian schools explores the linguistic challenges of Chinese students coming to Canada. While writing about “other people’s children,” Goldstein’s goal is to represent experiences of participants in a way that does not lead to the reproduction of practices of colonialism and racism (Goldstein, 312). Goldstein discusses how research-based drama can hold exciting possibilities for representing the issues of children, while playwriting also allows the researcher to challenge the “ethnographic authority” of their own writing (Goldstein, 316).

According to Goldstein, ethnography is an interpretative, subjective, value-laden project, this is why theatre and drama are effective vessels for ethnographic narratives (Goldstein, 316). The narrative can change from performance to performance depending on alterations in acting, intonation, lighting, blocking, and stage design. Even critique or analysis can change and be adapted to the play. These changes can shape or transform the very meaning of ethnographic text each time it is performed (Goldstein, 316). With ethnography, the concept of ownership and authority plays a major role - how much of it is you and how much of it is them? Goldstein states

that playwriting allows you to evaluate how your own bias dominates the text (Goldstein, 317). However, in my case, bias in the script was naturally limited due to the fact that the actors were also the ethnographic participants. This differs from other ethnographic plays such as Goldstein's "Hong Kong Canada" where the actors were not the ethnographic subjects themselves. During the rehearsal process for our play the youth would constantly intervene with revisions to the script in order to make it closer to their knowledge and experience of the issues being presented. This co-creation of the script as a participatory form of cultural production allowed the final performance to be more meaningful to them and for them to be more self-reflexive about the process and their role in it.

Performed ethnography has the power to reach large audiences and encourage public reflexive insight (Goldstein, 320). It has similar goals of 'research as praxis' where audiences of performed ethnography can leave "changed in some way" (Goldstein, 320). Patti Lather describes research as praxis as "involving research designs that are interactive, contextualized, and humanly compelling because they invite joint participation in the exploration of research issues. (Lather, 258). The idea of research being "humanly compelling" for me conjures up images of the theatre, of bringing ethnographic research to life in front of multiple and diverse "readers." Moreover, "empowerment" is often associated with praxis. The youth in "I am Rohingya" performing their stories and reliving traumatic moments, especially at a young age in front of hundreds of people, was in their view ultimately a tremendously empowering experience. When it comes to performed ethnography, plays should employ the same ideology of *research as praxis* which involves an active role in the transformation of social realities for the participants and audience members.

Dwight Conquergood (1991), a founder of the performance studies field, outlined five

crucial areas of performance studies that he deemed noteworthy. The first is looking at culture through the performance process. Conquergood posits that culture can be seen as a verb rather than a noun, and a process instead of a product. Culture is a fluid process that is molded and shaped by the performative invention of an identity and their lived experience (Schechner, 9). In a more literal sense, this project creates a space for Rohingya youth to negotiate or re-negotiate their identity and culture through a Rohingya-centered performance. The second area of focus involves ethnographic praxis and performance, where the methodologies of fieldwork centre around a collaborative performance between the researcher and the observed, or the knower and the known. In other words, my relationship with the Rohingya youth stories, and the “final” ethnographic play and its performances, constitute the fieldwork, rather than a more traditional form of data collection (Schechner, 9).

A third crucial area that Conquergood discusses is performance and hermeneutics, where he asks the question: what kinds of knowledge are privileged or displaced when performing an experience because of a way of knowing and understanding? (Schechner, 9). Performance is often a personal experience between the writer, the performer, and the audience. When dealing with a larger narrative, such as war or genocide from a more personal perspective, the question involves asking which stories are validated and which are not? In an ethnographic play, how much of my own knowledge as the writer seeps into the script or direction of the play? Although I received many of stories and experiences from the youth participants, I made creative decisions to exclude some details, thus impacting what knowledge the audience receives. Conquergood’s fourth point relates to performance and scholarly representation, pointing to the problematic translation of a performance into a published research study (Schechner, 9). In relation to this project, the Rohingya youth tell their stories themselves, and they are very much in control of

their own narrative. However, with a scholarly study where the youth relinquish their control and I as the researcher take over, how does that change the nature of the project? The voices or fieldwork data are now filtered through my voice and thus shape the experience of the audience/reader. For these reasons, the role of the research as another interlocutor must be taken into account (Schechner, 9). Finally, Conquergood discusses the politics of performance and the relationship between performance and power. How can performance be used to counter or challenge hegemonic ideologies and narratives (Schechner, 9)? Moreover, how can performance also sustain and reproduce that same hegemony? Our play could have easily reproduced the narrative of the “victimized Rohingya refugee” and the “Canadian saviour-complex,” so it was important to work against these essentialized tropes. It is important to understand the power of performance because as Schechner notes, performances are non-neutral actions that can lead to changing the circumstances of the “glocal:” the local and the global (Schechner, 10). Conquergood’s points sum up the essential aspects of performance studies and lend a multifaceted critical framework for my analysis.

Doing ethnographic theatre with a marginalized population like refugees requires a great deal from the creative artist in terms of the pedagogical approach. As Salverson (1999) reminds us, it is very easy for artists and educators to be caught in our own ideas and conceptions about performance, especially when it comes to pedagogy (Salverson). As the researcher and creative director, I found myself in a similar position struggling with the line between how much should I put into the play and how much of it should be solely created by the youth. Salverson confirms this dilemma arguing that we often create assumptions about what must be testified by refugees and what Canadian audiences need to hear (Salverson). The discourse of the “refugee -as-victim” and “Canada —as saviour” are common hegemonic narratives that can easily be

internalized and reproduced by artists. Salverson asks the important question, “How difficult is it in lived practice to rewrite that script? (Salverson)” This question was key to Salverson’s study and pedagogical approach and reflects my own concerns and considerations:

“When I was approached to research and create a play and video with refugees, my first thought was to listen more to the ideas of the refugees than to those of the initiating organization. My desire, as a well-trained popular theatre artist, was to "give voice" to the oppressed and pay all the attention I could to the refugees.” – Julie Salverson

Salverson’s choice to do a more pedagogical project led her to creating a theatre play and video that educated Canadians about the stories of multiple disrupted narratives and problematized the category of “refugee” (Salverson). Her observations and motivations from doing this project were echoed in the process of creating “I Am Rohingya.” Salverson notes that in order to create a performance with refugees, one must remember that they run several risks (political, emotional and social) in sharing their stories. In a scholarly study, pseudonyms can be used to protect the identity of the vulnerable population; however, in a play the individual is choosing to put themselves and their personal story on display; this is a risky act and is important that their stories are told with care. Another of Salverson’s observations was not to focus on “one refugee story” but instead tell the story of how particular people in similar circumstances live (Salverson). This was important to us as we progressed in this project, more so for the youth, because they constantly reiterated that this play was not for them but for the Rohingyas “back home.” In this sense telling their own stories and doing an ethnographic piece was a vessel for them to tell not just their personal experiences but also to showcase the “typical” Rohingya story.

#### **4.2 - Oral Narratives as Resistance**

Although my research does not involve the Indigenous community or Indigenous practices, examining Elizabeth MacIsaac’s “Oral Narratives as a Site of Resistance: Indigenous Knowledge, Colonialism and Western Discourse” is helpful since the method of using oral

narratives informs my study with the use of narratives from the Rohingya community. MacIsaac looks at the oral narratives of community elders from Kimmirut (formerly known as Lake Harbour), an Inuit community, to understand their relationship to the land and to inform agricultural policies that might impact their land and traditional practices (MacIsaac, 89). She states in the beginning that her ontology as a non-Aboriginal person located in the academy informs her discourse, keeping in mind the important role of the researcher's social location in the context of their work with marginalized communities.

She goes on to explore the power of Indigenous knowledge and how it is counter hegemonic in that it challenges mainstream forms of knowing (MacIsaac, 91). She posits that because of their counterhegemonic nature, oral narratives can serve as a form of resistance that challenges or subverts dominant forms of knowledge. MacIsaac goes on to cite Henry Giroux in defining three elements that are critical to this kind of resistance: it assumes a dialectical notion of human agency, recognizes that power can be both dominating and liberating, and hopes for social transformation (MacIsaac, 91). This concept is essential to my study as I also see the narratives and ethnographic play process as a form of resistance against the Burmese government who essentially seek to erase the Rohingyas from existence, both literally and culturally. Therefore, the Rohingya youth's participation in this research study and play is an act of resistance not only politically but against the media that chooses not to report on the plight of their people.

MacIsaac states that oral history as a cultural practice and a mode of cultural survival is important when it comes to expressions of resistance (MacIsaac, 93). Parallels can be drawn between Indigenous communities and the Rohingya community where Rohingyas must study in their own schools to preserve their language, and these theatre projects serve similarly to

preserve their stories and culture. Therefore, having participants engage in interviews or focus groups is not merely an academic exercise but an act of cultural resistance. This element transforms the research from a neutral study to 'research as praxis.' However, as the researcher, one must be cognizant of the power relations that exist between oneself and the participant; your positionality can influence the oral narratives collected since they are the holders of knowledge (MacIsaac, 93). MacIsaac attempted to structure her interviews loosely to create a space for expression and "forestall criticisms of hegemonic textual dominance (MacIsaac, 94)"; an example of this was a disclaimer made at the beginning which stated that the speaker was allowed to relate their story according to their experience subjectively. The concern of "Truth" in ethnography and oral narratives is an interesting discussion, yet one that should not find itself in this type of research. As Lather states, we live in a post-positivist era, where the idea of one absolute truth is refuted; post-positivists say there actually is no truth, nor a truth - truth is not one thing (Lather, 259). The experiences of Indigenous communities, or the Rohingya community, are made up of multiple truths based on the subjectivity of the participants.

One tactic MacIsaac used that is useful is her first question that asked the participants what they felt was important to talk about, which therefore allowed the informant to direct the trajectory of the discussion (MacIsaac, 94). This is useful in challenging one's own bias and indirectly pushing the discussion where you want it to lead. Ultimately the theme of her interviews was the importance of traditional knowledge and the preservation of it in order to resist colonial powers and their legacies. She states that if this method is a form of resistance, there must be the potential to emancipate people. This is a primary element of research as praxis, where the praxis must lead to liberation (Punch, 85). Challenging hegemonic forms of knowledge and giving power to oral narratives must support oppressed people in coming to

understand and changing their oppressive realities (Lather, 260-61). While this cannot be a guaranteed outcome, it must certainly be the intention from both the researcher and the participant: “Through narratives, a particular resistance to domination and hegemonic power structures is expressed through visions of social relations and values located within traditional knowledges and are also evidence of the resistance of people in the face of colonialism. (MacIsaac, 99)” I relate this understanding to my study on the oral narratives of Rohingya children and youth, recognizing that it is important to be aware that by bringing those stories from the margins to the center, we are collaboratively engaging in an act of resistance towards hegemonic structures that seek to ignore and silence the Rohingya people. Oral narratives push back and create new realities in a post-positivist world.

#### **4.3 - Identity, Migration, & The Arts**

Another important part of my research is to examine whether performance theatre can be an effective way for refugees to negotiate their identities at the crossroads of various cultural influences. When we worked on the final act of the play, which is where the youth resettle in Canada, the topic of assimilation came up a lot as well as what it means to be “Canadian”. Many of the youth expressed what can be described as the struggle for the delicate balance of asserting a Canadian identity and reclaiming the Rohingya identity that is on the brink of extinction. In the article “Identity, Migration, and the Arts: Three Case Studies of Translocal Communities”, the authors examine these very same ideas and argue that artistic forms of expression help translocal and transnational communities negotiate, challenge, and redefine the characteristics of their identity (Smith et al, 186).

The authors offer three different case studies of identity through artistic expression, including Sudanese boys in New York and Cuban exiles in Miami (Smith et al, 186). Being

separated from their homeland, either willingly or forcefully, these groups often feel the pressure to assimilate to the new, foreign culture while attempting to retain their own identity. They concluded through their findings that arts have played an important role in identity creation, where art can be both expressive and non-violent (Smith et al, 195). They describe art in this context as "...exposure, confrontation and contradiction which lead to recognition and analysis, which in turn awaken understanding. (Smith et al, 195)." In essence, they argue that the arts provide an alternative to confrontation and conflict and can have an even stronger productive impact in forming your own identity. While the authors acknowledge that these three examples are not universal and do not fit every context, their discussion is relevant to this project in uncovering the link between performance art and negotiating identity and representations of the Rohingya refugee youth separated from their old home and trying to survive in their new home.

Nira Yuval-Davis and Erene Kaptani explore the processes of identity constructions and transformations in participatory theatre and links between participatory theatre and social action. Yuval-Davis and Kaptani offer a case study where they engaged in participatory theatre with refugees from Kosovo, Kurdistan, and Somalia who had resettled in London. They note that identities can be thought of us as narratives constructed by people themselves or constructed by others and internalized by the subject. What is even more interesting is the space in which identity is constructed, particularly the theatre space. Judith Butler talks about the performativity approach to identity where since the stage space is more easily regulated than the social space outside, people can often use performance to shape their identities--she conceives all identities as performed (Yuval-Davis, Kaptani, 59-60).

While the theatre space can be used to construct identity, it can also be used to challenge and subvert hegemonic ideologies and the typical "refugee identity" of the victimized and

silenced. While the larger Rohingya community already feels silenced and ignored, the youth understood this theatre opportunity as a way to change power relations and their own personal identities. Yuval-Davis and Kaptani reaffirm that participatory theatre offers and helps develop techniques to challenge authoritative powers (Yuval-Davis, Kaptani, 62). They quote Augusto Boal saying, “Theatre is a conflict, struggle, movement, transformation, not simply the exhibition of states of mind. It is a verb, not an adjective. To act is to produce an action, and every action produces a reaction-conflict. (Yuval-Davis, Kaptani 62)” Boal and Yuval-Davis and Kaptani believe participatory theatre with pedagogical methods has a direct link to social action and claim it is a rehearsal for “real life” (Yuval-Davis, Kaptani 63). Not only did it allow their refugee participants to expose the oppressive social and governmental practices directed at their community, but it also created a shared sense of ‘us’ and ‘them’ which may seem harmful, but instead led to empowerment through solidarity and humour shared among them (Yuval-Davis, Kaptani, 65). The same effect was experienced in our project where all the youth could share their animosity and disdain towards the oppressive factors of their community – something that they did not do regularly as a group. Therefore, participatory and ethnographic theatre can allow refugees to reaffirm their home identity in Canada while negotiating their lives as Canadians as well. While hegemonic discourses about refugees are so prevalent, theatre can give autonomy to refugees to subvert those discourses and create a new identity in the theatre space. It can also help build solidarity through collective performance and the sharing of narratives. This will become more evident in the findings of my analysis section.

## **5.0 - Methodology**

The research I have pursued is a qualitative study of Rohingya refugee children and youth involved in the ethnographic theatre production, “I Am Rohingya.” An informal social contract

was made between myself as the researcher, and the Rohingya youth as participants - this contract included an attempt by both parties to use the play, the documentary, and the research study to better the social conditions of the Rohingya community both in Burma or surrounding refugee camps, and in Canada. Therefore, this study is not value-neutral in nature as it seeks to create some form of social change. Antonio Gramsci urged intellectuals to adhere to a “praxis of the present”, which referred to supporting oppressed groups in developing a consciousness of the power of their own actions in the world (Lather, 257). This concept evolved in a transformative qualitative research method known as “research as praxis”. This is essentially research that is explicitly committed to critiquing the status quo and building a more just society in an unjust and post-positivist world (Lather, 258). Both neo-Marxist critical ethnography and Frierean “empowering” participatory research are methods that are engaged with in my study and are both examples of research that is premised on a socially transformative agenda, in other words: research as praxis.

Many of the case studies and examples provided in the literature review align very closely with the methods I employ here. In essence, the methodology I take on is that of critical inquiry. Critical inquiry is a response to the experiences, desires, and needs of oppressed people - it is the initial step to understanding the world view of the participants (Lather, 268). It involves providing accounts from participants experiencing oppression as the basis for further analysis. The Rohingya children and youth’s narratives are the basis of my research, and I will explore those narratives to further analyze how ethnographic theatre impacted them. This project is in response to the desire for the Rohingya youth to tell their stories in a creative way. My goal is to prove that critical arts and inquiry can inspire and guide Rohingya youth in the process of cultural transformation (Lather, 268). This transformation involves a reciprocal relationship

between the researcher and participant. These dialectical research practices require an interactive approach that invites reciprocity and critique, otherwise it can lead to reifying the social conditions of the participants and to objectification (Lather, 269). My goal is to engage in methods that allow the Rohingya youth to be heard through performance, self-reflection and a deeper understanding of their political agency. The outcome of this hearing is that access to hidden and silenced lives will be more readily available and sought after, and similar methods can be replicated with other refugee and marginalized groups.

This study was conducted through three main qualitative methods: individual interviews, focus groups, and participant observation. The participants of this study were the Rohingya children and youth, their parents, and community members; however, for the purposes of this paper the voices that are featured will exclusively be those of the youth. This is in order to maintain a clear and succinct focus when investigating this study's particular research question. The Rohingya children and youth who took part in the play and in this study were from 8-22 years of age, both male and female and all reside in the Kitchener-Waterloo region. Others were interviewed but only for the purposes of the documentary film, such as Rohingya parents and adult Rohingya/Burmese community members. I conducted semi-structured interviews and focus groups that were videotaped for the documentary after obtaining consent (as per the Tri-Council Guidelines for Research Ethics). For the documentary portion of this research, the filming included segments of the play, the rehearsal process (pre and post performance), and interviews with experts in the field and community stakeholders (i.e. academics involved in arts based research).

The individual interviews are the primary source for analyzing my data and findings. While the study focuses on the youth reflections about the play, interviews with community members

and practitioners will go towards serving the documentary in a much broader analysis. All interviews were filmed for the purpose of both the research and the film. It is important to note that I have spent that past ten months getting to know the children and youth very closely, as well as their parents, so asking certain personal questions during the interview was made possible through cultivating a relationship of trust built over time. Film footage from these interviews was also conducted with the participant's (and their parents) free, prior, and informed consent. I conducted a total of 17 interviews, however only eight interviews are used in this study. Each interview was conducted in a private, enclosed space typically in their homes or in a booked room at a nearby community centre. Interview questions for the children and youth centered around two main themes: migration and identity, and the theatre process. Questions were asked regarding their experience of forced migration, about which nationality they most identify with, and their reflections on the theatre and rehearsal process, as well as their overall satisfaction with the final product, and the project's personal impact (see appendix A for the list of research questions).

While the interviews with the Rohingya parents and community members will be featured in the documentary and not in this paper, they nonetheless helped provide a broader context for Rohingya experiences in Burma and in the emergent Canadian Rohingya diaspora. These conversations also shed light on the personal and affective impact of the play as all of the interviewees had already seen the production. Rohingya parents and community members were asked about their connection to Myanmar before and during the violence as many of the children and youth were too young to remember those moments. Lastly, interviews with arts-based academics and practitioners that will be featured in the documentary lend a deeper analysis for addressing the role theatre or creative-based expression has played within social justice

movements in refugee diasporic contexts. Although those interviews are beyond the scope of this particular paper, they do inform the larger picture of Rohingya experiences.

In addition to the individual interviews, focus groups were conducted with the children and youth. As the play was very much a collaborative effort, the main focus for the group sessions with the children and youth involved reflections on the creative process including the final performance. I was interested to know what they enjoyed and did not enjoy in the process, what they liked most about the play, and what they would change were they to do it again. This helped understand the effectiveness of ethnographic theatre and provide direction as to whether it might be replicated with other refugee or marginalized groups. In addition to interviews and focus groups, I was engaged in participant observation and have since the beginning of this project kept fieldnotes of notable events during both the script writing and rehearsal process. Maintaining this ongoing record of group interactions, significant moments in the creative process in rehearsals and in the performance aided my analysis of the children and youth's personal growth and development during the course of this project. Finally, all data was transcribed and coded using the qualitative software program NVivo, which allowed me to categorize all of the interviews into succinct nodes and codes that directed my analysis.

## **6.0 - Theoretical Approach**

My theoretical framework is based on several facets I wish to explore about this specific issue. It is also important to note I focus my research on more of a cultural analysis than a political analysis; however, the film will add an element of politics, legislation, and historical context to the issue. The two theoretical frameworks that provide the strongest lens for this analysis are critical/public pedagogy and counterstories. While these theories guided the research approach and questions throughout the study, a more discursive framework was taken in order to

draw conclusions from the findings. An approach based on discursive framework as opposed to using a rigid theoretical paradigm was taken to allow the conceptual constructs to emerge throughout the research process and develop into a grounded, inductive theory; in other words, allowing the findings guide the analysis as part of an inductive process (Zine, 47). Zine notes that: "...an emergent theory evolves from a discursive framework, instead of being the construct from which the inquiry begins. (Zine, 47)." Especially with an ethnographic study, establishing a fixed and a priori theoretical framework before engaging with the participants does not only result in an inauthentic inquiry, but is also subject to more colonial forms of research where meanings are imposed upon marginalized communities. Placing theory before the data therefore does not allow for the participants' narratives to guide the inquiry and analysis.

What was imperative about this study was that the youth themselves were given agency to tell their stories in the most authentic way possible, as opposed to me telling it for them. For a group that is so seldom listened to, it was vital that they had the chance to engage with the audience in a way where the youth can teach the audience about the Rohingya genocide and refugee experience. In line with this, critical pedagogy refers to education that allows students to think critically and to analyze and interpret their social conditions, especially related to issues of power, identity and representation (Howard, 217). This is done by creating a more level field between the educator and the student, which creates an agency and establishes a two-way learning paradigm. One of the most popular pieces of literature to engage this kind of work is Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. In this book, Freire challenges the dominant form of pedagogy which involves a hierarchical structure of the teacher over the student. Traditional pedagogy assumes the teacher is the only knowledgeable expert and the students are subordinate, and the only way any learning can take place is if they listen to the teacher - it is a one way

method. Freire however posits a different approach to education that involves including the perspectives and voices of marginalized or oppressed people by validating their own existing knowledge, thereby undoing oppressive structures of education (Freire, 47-48). Traditionally critical pedagogy is more concerned with this paradigm in schools, however public pedagogy is more concerned with recreating this relationship in either a public space or with the public, and thereby linking learning to social change outside the traditional institutional schooling space (Giroux, 60-61). I view ethnographic theatre as a space where critical public pedagogy can take place in a unique and transformative way; not by traditional education but through a popular theatre medium.

Freire is primarily concerned with how oppressed groups can engage with pedagogy to, in his words, liberate themselves. He describes the idea of pedagogy of the oppressed as “A pedagogy which must be forged *with*, not *for*, the oppressed (whether individuals or peoples) in the incessant struggle to regain their humanity. (Freire, 48).” Rohingyas have been marginalized, oppressed, dehumanized, and silenced by the Burmese government and the global community. This play seeks to employ Freire’s concept of critical pedagogy with respect to the marginalized Rohingya youth in KW to allow them to tell *their* story on *their* terms. Just as Freire suggests, it was very important that the script was formed with the youth, and that the rehearsal process was a constant collaborative process between myself and the group - which helped to validate their knowledge as important expertise. Moreover, this play challenges traditional theatre and pedagogy by allowing the youth to teach the audience about their struggles and challenge dominant hierarchal and ageist ideologies.

Central to this investigation is how narrative and counterstory are implicated in identity construction. My assumption heading into this project was that the process of ethnographic

theatre would engage the Rohingya youth to construct or reassert an ethnic and religious identity that has been vilified and under siege. An apropos theoretical lens to study this element of the ethnographic theatre is that of counterstories. Essentially a counterstory is a narrative that resists an oppressive identity and attempts to replace it with one determined by the storyteller (Nelson, 6). When Nelson says ‘identity’, she is referring to the identity conceived by the ‘oppressor’ and internalized by the ‘oppressed’. In order to understand counterstories, participants’ stories must first be contrasted with master narratives, which are dominant hegemonic stories that serve as accepted understandings of people and groups (Nelson, 6). The counterstory positions itself against the master narratives and seeks to dismantle or amend them by first identifying the fragments that are misrepresentative, and then retelling the story about a person or group to make more visible the suppressed and relevant details (Nelson, 7). If the retelling achieves this goal, not only has the master narrative changed from the margins or subaltern to the center, but it has given the group members a new sense of agency and identity that is autonomous and not subordinate. When I use the term ‘subaltern’, I refer to the Rohingya group that remains outside the hegemonic power structure and must use Western ways of knowing such as the English language and Western theatre style to be heard (Sharp, 3-4). However, as Spivak would argue that their use of more Western methods to have a voice means that they are still subordinated, I would argue that this it does in fact allow them to express themselves and give them a voice against the Burmese power structure. This is because the Western hegemonic power structure is not necessarily what subordinates or oppresses them – yet it does contribute to their silencing.

Based on my research with the Rohingya youth and community, the master narratives that have been deployed by the Burmese government and the Buddhist leaders behind the genocide and ethnic cleansing in Burma include: Islamophobic tropes of barbarous menaces to the sanctity

of the culture and nation, illegitimate aliens that must be exiled out of the national space and political community, and dehumanizing rhetoric that shores up public consent for their violent displacement (Zarni, Cowley, 683). However, through the play, the youth were able to address all of these master narratives and create a collective counterstory that more-or-less rejects many of these assumptions. The theory of counterstories is that they will open up new possibilities so that the group members can enjoy greater freedom to say what they want and challenge any misperceptions (Nelson, 7). Counterstories also aim to alter an oppressed person's 'infiltrated consciousness' which Nelson refers to the ways in which a person operates as their oppressor wants them to (Nelson, 7). Where the Burmese government is actively trying to silence and erase the Rohingya identity, counterstories can be seen as rejection of that plan through self-expression. In other words, the oppressive silence and erasure that can be internalized by a Rohingya refugee's consciousness can also be altered by being vocal and telling a counterstory. Counterstories then become a way to assert or reassert identity and make people less willing to accept oppressive valuations of themselves by transforming the person into a competent moral agent and opening up a space to exercise their agency more freely (Nelson, 7). The play itself operated as counterstory by filling in the details the master narrative has ignored or suppressed. The data will reveal how the youth felt they were able to assert a newfound identity that rejected the 'subordinate Rohingya refugee' narrative and in fact participated in "narrative acts of insubordination" (Nelson, 8).

## **7.0 – Findings & Analysis**

The following section will examine and interpret the interviews with the youth and children as well as moments I noticed during my observations as the play's director. The emergent themes include agency, identity and diaspora, public pedagogy, and resistance

narratives, all of which will help answer the question: what kinds of work can ethnographic theatre perform with marginalized/refugee youth living in Canada? The themes of this analysis are based on the data collected from the participants that produce an inductive theory based on their narratives and experiences. It is worth noting that one of my original areas of investigation intended to explore the question of whether ethnographic theatre was able to perform the role of healing for those suffering with traumatic experiences. However, during my time with the youth I learned that many of them did not experience the trauma of the genocide firsthand, and the ones who did were so young at the time that they are now mentally and emotionally far removed from the experience. Therefore, this particular project will not be investigating ethnographic theatre as a way to work through traumatic experiences; however, that area could potentially be revisited with a different vulnerable population, such as Syrian refugees in Canada. Some moments of reliving traumatic experiences interestingly enough came from the the documentary interviews with the parents where the youth would translate their stories into English. I noticed that most of them were shocked while listening to their parents as they were never told these stories before and had to pause for a moment and take a deep breath before relaying the translation. Many were emotionally shaken having to recount their parent's often violent and horrific experiences. To further engage with traumatic narratives it would be advisable to have a trained counsellor or social worker present to deal with the psychological stress of this kind of testimony. For this project, MSS provided trained counsellors and social workers that were on-call for the youth and could be contacted at any time.

The participants in this study, who will be referenced and quoted from the interviews conducted, will be identified by pseudonyms: Omar (23 years old), Amar (19 years old), Nafisa (17 years old), Maryam (16 years old), Bilal (15 years old), Abdullah (13 years old), Hamza (13

years old), and Zaid (8 years old). These interviews took place both during the process of rehearsing the play and after they had done their debut performance.

### **7.1 - Meet The Rohingya Youth Voices**

In order to understand the types of roles ethnographic theatre plays for the Rohingya refugee youth, it is first important to position the youth and some of the experiences they have gone through. In the summer of 2015, after we had all decided on doing a play together, we met every weekend and the youth would share stories of their experiences back home and coming to Canada. I was surprised to learn that, despite their desire to tell the story of the genocide in Burma, most of them had not even been to Burma. The scenes in the play that take place in Burma come from stories told by their parents, and in a way they are depicting their parents in those scenes. Some of the older youth have more memories of seeing Burma, such as Omar who is the eldest of the entire group.

Omar: "I've been to Burma one time, I did some job as a fisherman. We used to go fishing and stuff, we illegally crossed into Myanmar, when we went to fish we went to their land. But the Burmese army they chased us to the other side and brought us to Bangladesh. Because we are going to illegally though. So even though it's my land I was an illegal immigrant there."

Almost all of the youth were born and grew up in the refugee camps of Bangladesh, a neighbouring country to Burma; yet most of them identify themselves as Burmese. This is an important element of the group's dynamic in the upcoming section on identity. Much of their connection to Burma is closely linked with their parents and the stories they have heard from them.

Amar: "I remember when my dad told me the Buddhists came they just showed us a gun, and they started killing someone and that's why we ran because we want to save our life, we want to save our kids."

Maryam: "They had their own house, they had their own backyard, a garden every day they would go to the garden and pick up fresh foods and took it and eat it as a family before the

Buddhist came. After the Buddhist came there was nothing. Their home was destroyed, everything was destroyed.”

Amar is recounting a memory that his father told him once, but frequently uses the word “we” – almost to associate himself with his people’s struggle. In other words, even though many of the youth did not experience the genocide in Burma first hand, they choose not to disassociate themselves from the struggle of their people. This is a common theme that occurred throughout the interviews, and will be unpacked later. It’s also worth noting that even though their parents were able to escape the country, many of the children’s extended family are still in Burma.

Bilal: “My grandpa, my grandmother, everyone I know is back there and there some in another place to. I used to visit them and now I can't even visit them. Now I can only see them through a computer, I can't even touch them because they're in that country.”

Many of the immediate experiences of hardship that the youth faced came from their time in the refugee camps. When asked about their time growing up in the camps, it was mixed with stories of difficulties and memories of happiness. Amar talked about the schools in the camp and how even though they paid their own money to go to school, it was not enough because the teacher’s education level was also very minimal – therefore much of the education centered around Islamic teachings. Amar and Nafisa also talked about the difficulties their father had finding work in Bangladesh as there was much hostility and resentment towards Rohingyas, with sentiments of foreigners ‘stealing jobs.’ However not all of their time in Bangladesh was negative, one of their favourite times that they miss now is Eid day, which is a religious celebration for Muslims all around the world. Maryam talked about how much she loved Eid and would look forward to it, but now that she is in Canada she cries every year because it is not nearly as fun for her. During Omar’s interview, he took us through almost his entire life story that included his father being murdered, being kidnapped multiple times for the purpose of

having his organs taken for trafficking <sup>2</sup>, living on the street, and having to work jobs to survive. My relationship with Omar was one of the most complex relationships I had with the youth because we are both the same age, and since I was the director there was a strange and sometimes awkward dynamic between Omar and I as I did not want to come across as more experienced or ‘wiser’ than him - but the power relations based on my privilege were certainly prevalent. This was something I was cognizant of during the time we worked together on the play and knowing his story I wanted to level the playing field and allow him as much space and ownership over the process as possible.

Since the beginning of this project, Nafisa was very passionate about women’s rights for young Rohingya women. Her first story that she ever shared with us was about how women were mistreated in both Burma and Bangladesh. She shared a lot of frustration at the fact that girls were not allowed to go to school in the refugee camps back home, and after puberty they are not allowed to leave the house at all.

Nafisa: “So because of that, because girls can't go out because people will see them, I think just because it's a cultural thing, girls are not allowed to educate, girls are not allowed to go over the husband, or get smart with the husband.”

Leaving Bangladesh and resettling in Canada was a time that many of the youth remembered as nerve-racking, confusing, and exciting. Overall their time growing up in Canada has been overwhelmingly positive, for both them and their parents. While they miss their

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<sup>2</sup> Omar recounts a harrowing story of being kidnapped at a young age in Bangladesh to steal his kidney. He decided to cooperate with them, and when he was taken to the hospital he asked to use the bathroom first and then quickly snuck out of the window and climbed down a tree. He then proceeded to jump on a bus explaining to the driver what he had just gone through, and finally managed to escape - only to be kidnapped again at a later time. The purpose of sharing this story is not to be sensational but to make their past vivid so their present context is clearer to understand.

families and friends back in Bangladesh, the opportunities and lifestyle in Canada to them is much more enjoyable over all.

Omar: “Canada was like a dream come true. A luxury everything you'll need. All-you-can-eat. I never had to ask anyone for anything because they gave me almost everything.”

Maryam: “I'm free. Because back home girls couldn't go to school, if the guys see girls outside they will come to your house and complain why is your daughter outside and stuff. And then the parents get mad they beat you up, why did you go without our permission? You are not allowed to go. If you go outside, you have to take someone with you. So I'm here on free, I can do whatever I want. I have no one to judge me.

Yet while the Rohingya community enjoy certain freedoms that they could not find for most of their lives, life in Canada is not all easy and simple for them. Many lament the bittersweet feeling of being in Canada while the genocide in Burma continues. Many of their families are still in Burma and Bangladesh - some have died and some are missing.

Amar: “Right now they're not happy, even though we're in Canada they still have that little feeling of back home, because they want to go see it again because all my grandfathers and grandmothers and everyone they lived there and they were happy until we cannot live there.”

Some of the youth were also bullied when they first went to Canadian schools because of their skin colour and the fact that they could not speak English well right away.

Hamza: “Except for once I got bullied because for some reason for some reason I was black or something, I don't remember.”

The protection of culture did not come immediately either, as some felt they had to assimilate to Canadian culture and forget their original culture and language in order to fit in.

Bilal: “Yeah it was really tough because it was all new friends that you have to make, you have to speak the language in order to understand them, you have to learn new stuff, forget all the old stuff. It was really hard.”

Finally, Omar experienced a more specific hardship in Canada where Family and Children Services took his baby brother and placed him into foster care due to his mother's history with mental illness. While Omar loves being in Canada, his ongoing fight for his brother

has caused him to have resentful feelings for this country. This is an excerpt from our interviews that reflected Omar's feelings about Canada:

Omar: "Everybody talked so good about Canada but they forget the bad stuff they do on the other side too. There's up and downs in every country...Because what Canada is doing to me right now is no better than what the Buddhists are doing to my people, to my family, there is no difference. Probably this is way worse. At least they don't separate you from your family. They kill you, but I'd rather be killed and separated from my family. They gave me a life but nobody from the bottom could make."

## **7.2 - Motivations for Theatre**

Back in the summer of 2015 when I first met the Rohingya youth, to my surprise they suggested putting on a stage play to tell the story of the plight of the Rohingya people. My surprise was twofold; at first it was surprise at the fact that they felt such a strong need to tell a powerful story at such a young age. I came to them with access to funds and they could have suggested something more recreational or leisurely, yet their main motivation was educating the masses on who Rohingyas are. Secondly, I was surprised that theatre was the first suggestion and was so widely accepted by everyone. They could have suggested doing a film, a speech, or a fundraiser – but theatre was the first and only idea. I was curious to know why the youth had chosen to do a stage play about an issue that they had not experienced first-hand, yet only experienced through their parents. For Omar, this was a main motivation for doing the play in the first place:

Omar: "... I get to feel. And also feel the things I never felt back home where my mother and my father feel and what my people feel – felt. Sorry the words aren't even coming out because, it's so... you know? I wanted to live that, I wanted to relive what I lived. Also what my parents lived. Everybody has a story of their own because some people went through it, some people didn't, some people sneaked in, some people got beaten up. So that's why I wanted to do it..."

As will be mentioned in later sections, this play became an important way for the Rohingya youth to be connected to their parent's heritage and their identity as a Rohingya. Being able to play their parents in the play helped connect the stories they were told growing up to a

place of empathy, for example Omar constantly uses the word “feel”. Theatre is unique in the sense where as an actor your job is to convey an emotion to the audience by feeling it internally and externally. Theatre acting allows a performer to engage with a raw experience of living an emotion in the moment and not breaking it until your scene or the play is done. They are also face-to-face with the audience and can engage them first-hand, which can be a much more emotional experience for an audience member when watching a powerful play as opposed to a film; the human element makes a big difference. This is something the youth felt as well.

Nafisa: “...I think it's a really good thing to use the theatre because we can express our feelings, we can show the audience our real personalities, our real emotions towards the play.”

Maryam: “Because they can actually see what we've been through. And actually see what emotions we have. It's a better way to show through the theatre act...They can see your emotions and your acting and how you felt in that place.”

Omar: “They need to feel that they are there in order to know it. They feel it so they know it. “Oh my God, these people have been through a lot, we should raise awareness and do something about it.” So doing it through the play was the best idea so people can see it...”

Maryam plays a mother in the play multiple times and also has her first scene with a character who is her father, so when I asked her if she thought of her parents in those moments she said yes. There were also moments in rehearsal and before a performance where some of the older youth would remind the group to do this for their parents. So wanting to be connected to their parents and the experiences of a Rohingya was a motivation for doing a theatre play – many of them ended up dedicating the show to their parents.

Nafisa: “And I thought to myself if I could do this for my parents, they will be really proud of me, this will be something really important for them.”

One of the main motivations the youth had for doing a theatre play was being able to spread awareness about the Rohingya people due to the misinformation and lack of knowledge about their people. This was the response I heard most from the youth, not just during the

interviews but throughout the project. The youth felt if they could get up in front of their community and tell their stories in a powerful way, to make an audience feel what they feel, then perhaps more people would be eager to help the Rohingya people in Burma.

Omar: “So that's why I wanted to do it because there's so many people whose suffering, dying and nobody seems to care, nobody seems to be hurting... That's why wanted to do a play, because not many people know about my people, and if we come with a play like that then we can educate every single one.”

Amar: “Because right now are in Canada we cannot say “oh where you're from?” “We're from Burma”, and people are like “oh where is Burma?” Most people don't know. That's what I really want to do and that's with the youth together can do, that's what we're trying to show to the people - who Rohingyas are.”

Maryam: “We could tell the whole world what's going on and like make Rohingya popular, not popular, but make Rohingyas noticed. Make Rohingya noticed like Syria. How everyone, if you talk about Syria, everyone will know who they are. Like they're building schools for them. But if we make a play and people come to watch they will tell other people and that people will tell other people, and it will keep going on. And then soon everyone will know. And then they'll start building school for us.”

However, it did not just end for the youth at spreading awareness – some of the youth had bigger plans in mind. As Maryam mentions, many of the youth saw this as an opportunity to make a difference back home and end the violence of the Burmese government. Syria was used often as an example by the youth of how the international community could be reacting to the genocide in Burma. When I asked Zaid, the youngest actor of the group, why he wanted to get involved in this play his response summed up what most of the other youth felt as well.

Zaid: “That's to show my country! That's to tell the Buddhists to not do this bad stuff to our country!”

### **7.3 - Personal Impact of the Play**

The most noticeable difference for both myself and the youth was how much their personalities evolved and shifted since before the inception of the play. As Nelson tells us in engaging with counterstories, the participants often experience a new sense of agency allowing

for a space to exercise their agency more freely (Nelson, 7). Not only did I start to notice stark difference in the personalities of the youth, but it was also a change that they themselves picked up on in each other. The common change that many of them talked about when I asked them how the play impacted them was their newfound ability to be more vocal in everyday life. Nafisa and Maryam talk a lot about how the play, both the rehearsal process and the performance, changed how they interact with family, friends, and strangers at school.

Maryam: “It affected me in a good way because before I didn’t join this act, I couldn’t talk to people. I couldn’t say what’s in me, I couldn’t share with people. But now I can... Before I was shy, I was nervous. I think whatever I say is wrong, I thought it was wrong. But now whatever I say I’m proud of.”

Nafisa: “Before the play, I was very shy as you know. I was very shy to speak with people. At that time I wasn’t a very outgoing person, I would never go up to someone and say hi or my name is this and that. Make friends or anything...But after the play I am an outgoing person since I know my parents stories, I always want people to come see my play, I always want to go talk to people and tell them I’m doing this, come see our play. So there is a lot of differences, now I’m not really shy anymore because I have spoke with thousands of people I think. “

Maryam not only says how she was not able to speak much, but she also thought whatever she would say was wrong and felt a sense of low self-esteem. Having done the play, she now feels a sense of pride in her words and does not hesitate to speak. Nafisa talks not only about speaking in front of thousands of people (referring to the audience member count from each performance we have done so far), but also notes that she now knows her parents’ stories and was able to tell them in a performance. That act of ‘knowing’ and ‘telling’ seemed to reinforce a confidence in Nafisa that allows her to be more comfortable in social settings, and more sociable in general. It seems that both girls felt a sense of pride linked to knowing and telling their peoples’ story, which translated into their personalities. She goes on to say how this play has motivated her to say and pursue what she wants without hesitation. In other words she has become a “competent moral agent” (Nelson, 7). It is worth noting that shortly after the

performance, both Maryam and Nafisa were hired for their first jobs – something they were thrilled about as it is uncommon for Rohingya girls to leave the house for work.

Nafisa: “...now I feel like I will get what I want and I will get success in the future...after the play I was like, I can do it because there's nothing to hide, I want to show the world who I am.”

Maryam: “I don't often get that opportunity for the time to tell my story. So I did on the theatre. I will try to tell my story more often.”

Both girls feel a strong sense of agency to be more honest to themselves and show others who they are. Ironically, telling their story on stage in front of hundreds of people was the safest space for them to come out of their shells. From Maryam's quote, it seems that being able to tell your story on stage creates a desire to continue that action, both on stage and in real life. Self-expression seemed to be a liberating thing for many of the youth where they felt now after having done the play they could show more truthful layers of themselves to the world and not worry about being judged. One of the warm-up exercises I would do with the youth during rehearsals was standing in a circle and together making funny faces and noises, contorting our mouths and facial features. The purpose, as I would explain to them, was to not let how others perceive you affect how silly you made your face. I would tell them to block out what others thought of them and just focus on themselves, which would help their confidence both on-stage and in real life. The younger aged youth had no problem with this exercise, but it was the older youth who found it difficult – especially the boys. However, I found it fascinating that in my interview with Hamza, who was one of the boys who felt self-conscious about looking silly, changed the way he thought of himself after the performance.

Hamza: “I like showing my emotions, showing how I feel. And not to be nervous, not to be shy. Because everyone knows who I am, so I can just share what I am and not hold anything back. I just love to be with the group.”

Some young boys view showing emotions as a sign of weakness and employ a hyper-masculine persona, which is essentially mirroring exaggerated beliefs about what it means to be a 'man'. These beliefs include emotional self-control or 'toughness', violence, danger, and degrading attitudes toward women and sex (Vokey, 562). Even hobbies like drama and theatre are seen as 'feminine' compared to 'manly' sports. This type of masculinity is learned and is usually performed in everyday life if the man or boy does not genuinely identify with those ideologies. However, with some of the young boys in the group, it was performance in the theatre space that allowed them to connect with who they really were as men and take off the mask of hyper-masculinity. Going back to Butler, the stage space is more easily regulated than the social space outside, meaning performance can act as a tool and allow for people to shape their identities - in this case their masculine identities (Yuval-Davis, Kaptani, 59-60).

Hamza was not only able to cope with sharing more of himself with others, he enjoyed it and wishes to do it more. He partly equates this with being with the group every week, where in a safe space he can be himself and not feel judged. It is important to note that a lot of these personal changes did not all happen on the night of the performance, but are an amalgamation of months of weekly meetings and rehearsals to build a space based on trust. The rehearsal space also became a place of escape for some of the youth, especially Omar. At the time during our rehearsal period, Omar was undergoing legal battles to secure custody of his little brother and become his guardian. In the midst of that ordeal, he would sometimes miss rehearsals but find time to be there almost every week. While my immediate thought was rehearsal is becoming a burden for him, after asking about it he had a different response.

Omar: "You know there's so much things going on in my life, rehearsal was one of the best part of it. I know it's not the best because emotions get too real, like sometimes I even hide it, I feel what I feel and stuff...Because when I'm at the play I feel like I'm in my own world. There's a lot

of kids, to a come having an actual to childhood...But every time I go to the play I forget about my life and step into my parent's shoes, have the fun."

When Omar and some of the older youth are at rehearsal, I sometimes had a difficulty getting them to settle down as they would fool around a lot. My expectations for them as the eldest were to be more mature, but as it turns out from Omar's response, this was a place for them be young and frivolous. Much of their childhood, especially Omar's almost non-existent childhood, had difficulties and struggles. Whereas in rehearsal, even though they deal with serious subject matter, it was a place for them to let loose and "have a childhood". Omar also mentions the process of getting into character and stepping into his parent's shoes was fun as if they were able to hide behind the mask and, in its simplest terms – play. However, playing their parents in scenes including violence, execution, and terror was not always fun for the youth. As many of them were trying to think of their parents to get into character, having to relive that every week made it difficult for them at times.

Omar: "Yes because after reenacting your whole life and knowing some more stuff about your people, it's kind of hard. I get nightmares of it because even though the life I'm living right now is hard, but we have to get through it you know?"

Bilal: "The toughest scene was a Buddhist invasion, the persecution. Because we're seeing people die and getting killed for no reason, just because they want their land, they could've just asked. But instead they're killing people. That's the hardest scene."

Although many of the youth did not experience violence first hand, having to act out violent and horrific scenes was difficult for some of the youth, to the point where Omar describes having "nightmares". It is important to note again that Omar and any other of the youth who had troubling emotions like this were offered MSS' counselling and social work services. It was crucial that the youth did not leave this experience feeling traumatized or burdened in any way. The particular scene Bilal is describing is a sequence where the Buddhist government disrupts the upbeat lifestyle of the Rohingyas and drives them out of their country; some of the youth

play Rohingyas, but at one point all of them play Buddhists. This is not only an unnerving scene for the audience but also seemed to have a troubling impact on the youth; nevertheless, as Omar says, they still feel the need to get through for the sake of the story. Many of the youth found this play to be a learning experience about the Rohingya crisis as well. Some of the younger aged youth felt disconnected from the Rohingya genocide, but after doing this play it created an awareness within themselves to be more conscious about the issue.

Hamza: “I think that I'm more mature because before the play I was all silly and when people talk about Rohingya I'd be like “oh Rohingyas”. But now when people talk about Rohingyas it's serious because people are dying. People talk about Rohingyas and now it's serious to me...now I think more deeply into it, like I search stuff up if I don't know about our history.”

Overall the personal impact of this ethnographic play on the youth helped them not only to break out their shells and comfort zones, but it also allowed them to confront their identity as Rohingya and develop a sense of moral agency in their lives. The theatre space acted as a place where healing could occur, personalities could transform, and the realities of the plight of the Rohingya people could be confronted and relived.

Maryam: “I could express myself in a theatre more than a movie. When I was on the stage I thought that it belonged to me, it's my time to tell the story.”

#### **7.4 - Impact on Identity & Counterstory**

Identity played a huge part in the study where some of the youth were able to construct an identity by using ethnographic theatre, and others were able to reassert the identity they already felt connected to. Based on the fact that most people have not heard of the Rohingyas as a result of lack of media coverage, it was important for myself and the youth that the word ‘Rohingya’ was in the title of the play. This allowed for conversation between audience members as to who the Rohingyas are, challenging them to do research and become more educated. Early on in the project's beginnings, Amar pulled me aside and wanted to remind me that the whole

point of doing this play was to make sure people knew about the Rohingya culture and traditions – he wanted to make sure that did not get lost in all the violence of the play. It was important to him that people saw both sides of Rohingya culture, and not just all of the horror. Another observation I found interesting was after our first performance of the show, during the Q&A portion, Omar sporadically took the microphone and asked the audience if they would all say “Rohingya” together. It was an interesting moment that I took note of and which I asked him about later.

Omar: “I want them to know the people back home who need help, I want them to know that someone out there is yelling their name and saying they're one of you, so they feel you and they know you. That's why wanted everyone to say I am Rohingya if you want to support Rohingyas.”

For Omar, saying the name out loud was a way to support Rohingyas – and not just the people, but the very existence of the culture. In a context where the Burmese government is actively trying to exterminate not only an entire peoples, but also their culture, language, and way of living, having a room full of Canadians, even for a brief moment, acknowledge the existence of the Rohingya people meant that they were finally being heard. Their identities as Rohingyas were being validated and their efforts to put on a show for their people felt accomplished. Similarly, a campaign started in 2014 by UnitedToEndGenocide called for President Barack Obama to say the word ‘Rohingya’ as a major act of recognition, which became known as the *#JustSayTheirName* campaign. Finally, on November 14th, 2014, in a press conference in Burma Obama said “Discrimination against the Rohingya does not express the kind of country that Burma wants to be. (Andrews)”

For the youth, being Rohingya is one of the most important things in their lives. No matter how much they loved sports or drama, the singular element the prize about their identities

is being Rohingya – even for the youngest cast members who barely remember being in Bangladesh.

Omar: “What does it mean to be Rohingya to me? It's my life. To some people we are animals that need to be killed. To some people we are bugs that need to be stepped on. Some people see us as terrorists, some people see us as criminals.”

Amar: “And what does it mean to be Rohingya? It's like the Buddhists are taking the name away from us, that's what I feel like. That's what I want to do, I want to face them.”

For the Rohingyas, the master narratives described earlier are purveyed at the expense of their agency and safety and result in situations of victimhood, silenced youth, xenophobic and Islamophobic sentiment, and denial of a Buddhist government committing acts of violence that are in contrast to their beliefs. All of these elements are dealt with in some way, shape, or form in the play, yet the biggest issue facing the Rohingyas and the youth is lack or absence of knowledge about the Rohingyas. This was one of the main motivations for wanting to do an ethnographic theatre production in the first place.

Hamza: “Sometimes I'll say Rohingya but if I say that most of the time they'll be like who's Rohingya, what's a Rohingya? Are you just making this up? So most the time I say I'm Canadian and they believe me, when I say Rohingya they say what is that? And then when they search it up they see all the true horror of our nation...No one knows our country. If you meet someone and they say I'm from Syria, everyone will know their country. If someone says their from Kenya, everyone will know that. But if you say you're Rohingya, no one will know where you're from.”

Hamza has trouble telling people what his nationality is because they will either not know what he is talking about or will judge based on the horrific images found online when you search ‘Rohingya’. In order to avoid this awkwardness, he tells people he is Canadian despite his devotion to his country. This was the identity struggle I noticed throughout the process of this project, where when we first met the youth were very influenced by Canadian culture and would barely teach me about the Rohingya culture. However, as we continued to meet consistently every week and talk about their culture, they started to share more and teach me about the

Rohingya culture. When the importance of the show started to sink in for everyone, I noticed a shift where they would always remind each other why they were there and who they were doing this show for. This was evident in my interviews with the youth as well where many of them felt more connected to their roots after having done this play. Being able to challenge the master narratives and define who Rohingya were from scratch seemed to be an incredibly liberating experience for many of the youth. Some of them, like Abdullah and Hamza, came into the group feeling very disconnected from the Rohingya culture; whereas people like Omar and Bilal were very vocal about being Rohingya. Bilal even talks about having a fear of losing his language and culture completely when he first came to Canada, and wanting to make sure he could preserve it. Each had very different experiences in terms of their identity.

Amar: “My favourite scene is where we all gather together we put our hands to a heart and we say we are Rohingya. That's my favourite part because we are expressing ourselves to the people and we say no, we are proud and we are Rohingya, and we are telling them that this is who we are and this is where we came from and this is what we do and what we are. That's my favourite part.”

For those who came into the project identifying more with Canadian culture, the play helped them construct an identity of a Rohingya that they wanted to be, on their own terms. They no longer had to play the part of the victimized, silent Rohingya refugee. Instead they could be the vocal, outspoken, and proud Rohingya who tells their story in front of hundreds of people. They were able to dispel the master narrative that pushed them away from their identity for so long and build a new identity that they had a hand in moulding during the production of the play. For those youth who came feeling some connection to being Rohingya, the play allowed them to reassert their identity. For these youth their ‘infiltrated consciousness’ that once equated being Rohingya to that of the master narratives are now being rejected and subverted by their engagement with the counterstory of “I Am Rohingya” (Nelson, 7). The youth no longer feel the

need to play the role of the ‘subordinate Rohingya refugee’ and can construct or reify their identities and open up new possibilities to exercise their agency more freely (Nelson, 8). As the quote by Maryam mentioned in the previous section speaks to, the Rohingyas do not often have the chance or the space to tell their story – especially the youth. But when we were able to facilitate a space and an experience where they could say and do whatever they wanted, it allowed them to reaffirm and reassert who they are and validate their existence.

Zaid: “Yeah the play helped me a lot. Showing the play to everybody, telling the people that we’re still alive, we’re not dead, telling the refugees that we’re still alive. They think that we’re dead the whole way, that all of us are dead. Telling them we’re still alive, we’re still trying to fight for our country...”

Zaid’s quote here to me means they were able to challenge the dominant, hegemonic master narrative of the Rohingyas through their performance, and in-so-doing create a collective identity for the new generation of the Rohingya people who will always fight for the existence of their culture. The collective identity element was immensely important as well when it came to constructing and reaffirming identities. Surprisingly, I learned that outside of the play, many of the youth did not hang out with each other recreationally; even though some were in the same classes in school, they did not spend time with each other. Many of the girls told me they had Canadian friends and not many Rohingya friends; outside of their sisters, they would only see each other about once or twice a month. Abdullah even talks about how he did not even like other Rohingya youth, but how that is now starting to change after his involvement with the play.

Abdullah: “I’m getting used to Rohingya people more because I didn’t even want to chill with other Rohingyas because they’re annoying, I felt like that, they’re funny, they tickle you and stuff like that. And now they’re fun, the way they act. They’re getting better. And I like them the way they are you know?”

Bilal: “I want the world to know who Rohingyas are so when people asked me what my nationality as I don’t have to say I’m Canadian anymore, I can just say I’m Rohingya and be happy about it. So I have nothing to hold back.”

These two quotes show that some of youth tended to distance themselves from their Rohingya identity--what might be considered a socially devalued identity. Identifying as Canadian and gravitating more towards Canadian friends shows how they value an identity imbued with power and privilege as opposed to one linked with violence and discrimination. The youth then internalize the master narrative and subconsciously devalue their own identity as 'lesser' than a Canadian identity, thereby alienating themselves from the Rohingya culture and community. All of which plays into the oppressor's master narrative of dehumanization. Where the Burmese government is actively denying the very existence of the Rohingya people, Bilal going as far to even say he is Canadian and denying being Rohingya plays into the oppressor's will. The defining factor that changed their identity affiliation was not only participating in the ethnographic theatre play, but creating it with together with their community members.

The dynamic that existed in the rehearsal space seemed to be very important for most of the youth. In a space where they were sharing personal stories of hardship and acting out sensitive scenes, having the others in the group that could relate to them and not only sympathize with them made it a very comfortable space for each of them.

Bilal: "Yeah it's really nice having Rohingyas because there's no other people that we know, that we know really well. And this is the only people that can understand us, that are feeling it."

Hamza: "All the Rohingyas meeting together, you have nothing to hold back you can share all your feelings, share everything. You can do whatever you want, no one's going to make fun of you, no one's going to bully you, no one's going to say stupid things about you. Like everyone felt the same thing, everyone knows how it feels to get teased."

The collective bond tied by their shared experiences as Rohingya refugees struggling with their identities helped create an environment where they could navigate and negotiate their own identities, each with their own different outcomes. For Abdullah, even feeling more connected to his fellow Rohingya people allows him to be more involved with the community,

which in turn builds a stronger identity. What surprised me is that this project not only brought the youth closer together, but also did the same for the parents and families. Amar mentions how not many of the families were close before the play, but now that they drop their kids off at rehearsal, have seen the show multiple times, and get together to share stories and rehearse – the play has brought the broader community together as well.

Amar: “Yeah, the families that live in Canada, no one talks to one another...But once we started this play everyone started coming together, now every family talks to each...All the families I see here they've gathered together, their talking, they're very nice.”

Many of the youth told me their parents never used to tell them about the more horrific stories of their life in order to shelter the kids from those memories. But when they saw their children actively seeking out their stories and reenacting them on-stage, they felt the desire to connect with their children and tell them stories they had never heard before. The youth had displayed a level of maturity that brought their parents closer to them to trust them with their oral narratives and memories, and to preserve them through the theatre production.

Omar: “Most of the play I've been through. You have to live the story to play it, because this is not just a play where it's written - this is a true story. You have to live that life in order to act that and reenact.”

### **7.5 - Public Pedagogy and Activism**

This project centers around praxis and the engagement of social action through ethnographic theatre. It was not enough for myself as the researcher nor the youth to put together a play that did not have any social impact resulting from it. In fact, the impetus to move toward social justice was the primary motivation for the youth in co-creating this play as a vehicle to tell their stories. An essential element of this project was the pedagogical approach taken that created an environment and public forum for the youth to educate their audience. Some youth stressed the importance of education and their frustration with the lower quality of education in the

Bengali refugee camps. Their excitement to be in Canadian schools and their appreciation for the significance education has gives some credence to why they wanted to “educate” Canadian audience members about the Rohingya genocide and struggle.

Omar: “That's why wanted to do a play, because not many people know about my people, and if we come with a play like that then we can educate every single one...What we need to teach them, that means we educated them. They stand up for my people. So they know that all they see in the TV is not all of it. There's more to the story. So we need to make sure everyone is heard and see what is there.”

Not only was it imperative for people outside their own community to learn about the Rohingya struggle, but this mission to raise public awareness through theatrical education is also linked to creating a clear social impact—a clear link with Freire’s work on pedagogy of the oppressed. For the youth putting on an ethnographic play about the Rohingya experience did not end with merely raising awareness. They regarded the play as a message to the Burmese government letting them know that there are Rohingyas who are choosing to be vocal and who will not allow them to carry on with their genocide without scrutiny and upheaval. The goal for them was also to gain more allies in Canada to help them stand against the Buddhist regime of Burma. It was also a call for the Canadian government to put pressure on Burma and to take in Rohingya refugees as they have been taking in Syrians.

Nafisa: “Yeah I really want to show that girls are human beings, they're not animals. Like here in Canada even treat animals or dogs better than the girls were living back home, honestly. They are treating the dogs like their babies or their child, but back home girls are like some kind of trash or something. Just because they're girls.”

Bilal: “And then if we do this in a bigger place, they can get the message too. And then they can spread it around the country and get bigger numbers which can reach the government, and hopefully do something about us.”

Hamza: “Because I'm excited for the people, the people that are watching they will share our story to other people and they will keep sharing to more people. And then soon it will go to a big person, like a person that can change our future, change the future of Rohingya people. So that's why get excited when I go on stage.”

Amar: “I think if we keep continuing this I think everyone will gather together and go back and do something about it. That's what I feel and I see the progress in this play, everyone's coming together and everyone's being happy, and everyone's telling their story, and everyone's telling their personal stories, sharing and people learn.”

Their logic, in essence, is that if more audiences around the world saw this play then it would spur them to action and eventually governments would learn about their story and decide to get involved in the Rohingya genocide. Therefore, engaging in ethnographic theatre is not necessarily a recreational experience, but more of an act born out of necessity in the face of their ethnocultural and literal erasure as a people. As Conquergood notes in regards to performance studies, performances are non-neutral actions that can lead to changing the circumstances of the glocal. In this case, the local Kitchener-Waterloo community becomes more aware and active in global issues such as the Rohingya genocide.

When I asked Bilal about acting he mentioned how he does not like to act, but says he will do it when he needs to. For Bilal and others acting and ethnographic theatre becomes a tool in their arsenal that they can utilize only when they feel must. Their performed ethnography then becomes praxis in which the play has an active role in the transformation of the social reality for the Rohingya youth and community. In essence, performed ethnography under a public pedagogical framework creates an alternate form of activism for the subaltern where it confronts audiences with a social or global issue using oral narratives and theatrical elements, such as acting, music, lighting, costumes, and props. For the Rohingya youth this alternate form of activism is not only preferable, but has proven to be more effective in their experience. Bilal talks about how when they first came to Canada they would go every week to city centres with their community and organize rallies and protests to raise awareness of the genocide and ethnic cleansing they had just escaped.

Bilal: "...some people were just showing with signs, but that's not really getting to people, they're just walking by. Some people are just looking. Some people are just getting it, but when they go home a few hours later they forget it. But when you do it in a play they really get it because they feel like they are in the story, in the place that we are in now. And that gets into their thinking."

The differentiation for Bilal between traditional activism and ethnographic theatre is that the emotional and empathetic element is missing during rallies and protests. The feeling of being "in the story" and in their shoes can only be captured during theatrical performance where the oppressed are reliving these horrific moments right in front of the audience, allowing them to engage with their emotional side more easily. For Bilal this play was the most impactful act of resistance for Rohingya people in Canada.

Bilal: "This is the best we can do probably, for our people. Because this is the biggest thing we have done right now for our people, in Canada."

Omar: "Because we have to show the people the real stuff, not something they can laugh at. Something that you can educate them, something they can feel. Something they can say if these people need help, they need attention. That's why we show up to rehearsal."

Hamza: "If everyone knows who we are then we can change the future of people that are in Burma right now and we can bring them to Canada or help or change the government system in Burma."

It was important that this project featured Rohingya youth and children exclusively, and did not have any adults or non-Rohingya people on stage. The purpose of this decision was to provide a platform for the youth to be vocal and develop a sense of agency, especially since these factors had seemed virtually non-existent. Those within the community who represented the voice of the Rohingya community up until this point were the older community members who had proficiency in English, primarily one particular person. However now the community has gained fourteen more representatives - all of which are youth. According to Friere's work youth voices are often devalued in comparison to elder voices. Likewise, the validity of their narratives is often questioned since they are seen to be 'too young' to remember certain events. This project

employed the philosophy developed in 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed' and relied solely on the youth to provide the narratives to tell a representative story of the Rohingya experience. While the goal for the youth was to create a story that could have a larger social impact, many of them surprisingly did not believe they could achieve such a task at their age, as is illustrated in this poetic response by Hamza.

Hamza: "It never crossed my mind because like I'm a child, I never thought I could do such a big thing. It's a short play that can do such a huge impact to our religion, it can change the future for a lot of people. It can change what they see in a future, they won't see blood, they will see the sunset."

To their surprise they managed to captivate an audience of 500 people and develop a new sense of empowerment, despite their age or identity. Their feelings post-performance reflect an attitude of confidence and pride that drives them to continue performing in front of audiences, telling their story to the public, and having a direct hand in resisting and ending the reign of the oppressive Burmese government. In my interview with the youngest cast member, Zaid, he shockingly spoke numerous times about military intervention being the alternative solution to the play in order to end the genocide in Burma. I asked him which he thought was more effective in his mind, ethnographic theatre or military intervention.

Zaid: "First I would wait, I'm going to see if the Buddhists are listening to the play and stop doing it. If they don't I'm going to do the army, I'm going to do my Army, because they're not listening. What should I do, just stand there? I'm not gonna stand there, I'm just cannot wait and kill them."

In his response Zaid prioritizes the play as being the first step in resisting and combating the Burmese government; it is only if that fails that he would resort to violent tactics. He does not see ethnographic theatre as a secondary mode of resistance, but a primary mode that must reach the Burmese government directly. His suggestion of military need is understandable given his life experiences and worldview; however, Zaid's feeling of empowerment and having a part

to play in the end of his people's suffering at the age of eight is something born out of this experience of ethnographic theatre. Instead of Zaid joining the military and seeking out violent tactics of resistance, Zaid and the others now have a non-violent and powerful tool to join the activist collective and become powerful agents of social change.

After performing the play for the first time, the youth felt like their efforts had sincerely made a difference. They felt like they had reached the audience and had, for once, finally been heard and understood. Being able to hear and see the reactions from the audience during the Q&A period and having audience members approach them after the show, the youth were able to witness first-hand the profound effect they had on a group of people who had little to no knowledge of the Rohingya genocide, and were now going home with more knowledge and understanding. For some of the youth, this public education piece was the most rewarding and validating part of the entire project.

Nafisa: "Oh my God I was like shocked. But that really makes me feel that people here in Canada do you want to know who Rohingyas are, they do want to support others because they donate money, they want to help us a lot, and there is a lot of people that said "you should do it one more time, you should travel around Canada and show it to people"... the comments they were giving us really makes me proud, and makes me want to do the play over and over differently."

Abdullah: "The most rewarding part was giving the people that were crying, when I saw the people crying and made me feel like they actually care. It felt good...So I think I cried a little because after the people were asking questions, they even came to people I don't know and said you did well, I hope you move further in your life, they said stuff like that. I felt good when my culture, when they look out for Rohingya people they will see us trying to represent them..."

Bilal: "I think I've done my job. I think they need to do their job now. They need to help us."

Bilal's use of the word "job" again reinforces the fact that they saw this ethnographic theatre experience as a duty that they had to perform in order to liberate their people back home. Bilal and many of the others feel that the rest is up to the people who see the play to start helping the Rohingyas themselves. Now that they have become witnesses to the Rohingya community's

stories, the youth feel that a responsibility to advocate for change comes with that. They feel watching and applauding is not enough; that they did not do this for fame or personal recognition. They did this to help their families and friends back in Burma and to bring attention to the refugees spread out across the world. The concept of witnessing and testimony is an entirely different field with many complexities, but for the sake of this study it is important to note that the youth feel a responsibility is imbued on the audience members as witnesses to their testimonies of genocide and international crimes.

This point became prevalent immediately after the performance where Bilal took the microphone and made an impromptu speech without anyone's knowledge. He first asked all the Rohingya community members in the audience to stand and then asked everyone to clap for them, as they were the ones who went through most of the violence and trauma. The speech then went on to thank the audience for coming to see the show. He then asked the question, "we want to know what *you* are going to do for *us* now?" He wanted them to know why they did this show and that it was for all of the Rohingya people who are suffering and dying in Burma and in other countries. Now it was the Canadian audience's turn to speak out and tell the Canadian government to intervene. The audience was taken aback for a moment, but then applauded Bilal's brave and bold speech. His speech seemed to say that the relationship they had with the audience was reciprocal, where the youth gave them an insight into their private lives, histories, and traumatic experiences, and in return the audience had to take them and do something productive with it - something that contributed to the betterment of the Rohingya people. When I asked Bilal why he made this speech, he said it was not something he planned but something he felt he needed to say in that moment. It is worth noting that Bilal is usually more quiet and

reserved, which is why the cast and crew were quite shocked by his spontaneous and powerful speech.

Bilal: "...I was thinking in my head that if we just let these people go, they're going to think the same thing that there's no Rohingyas in the world...So I stood up and made that speech, and made all the Rohingyas there stand up said "these are all the people that went through this, can you guys make a difference for these people?" And then no one really said anything after that...I just wanted to stand up.

## **8.0 - Conclusion**

Based on the data collected and presented in the study, it is clear that the impacts of ethnographic theatre have played multiple roles for the Rohingya refugee youth. The three major outcomes of this study in terms of the roles ethnographic theatre has played for the Rohingya youth was the following: the play has transformed the youth into moral agents filled with a newfound sense of confidence in life; it created a strengthened connection to their identity, culture, language and religion as Rohingyas; and a played a role in the resistance against the oppressive Burmese government that seeks to erase their people from existence. For this youth group, ethnographic theatre has become their tool to teach the masses about their history and culture, and how it is currently being silently stolen from them. Performed ethnography and praxis under a public pedagogical framework creates an alternate form of activism for the subaltern as it engages audiences with a social or global issue using oral narratives and theatrical elements.

The goal of this study is to provide readers with a successful case study of ethnographic theatre so that it can be replicated for use with other refugee or marginalized groups. The project can also be used as a reader's theatre or a table read through in schools, which should be followed up by a debriefing between the participants and facilitator. It is recommended that the facilitator have some sort of background or training in theatre in order to teach the participants

theatre techniques that will aid their performance, but also that the facilitator not enforce their creative authority over the group and instead help create a space where the participants can engage in autonomous creation. Being able to facilitate this ethnographic theatre project has been one of the most unique experiences of my life. The Rohingya youth of Kitchener-Waterloo are some of the most resilient, brave, and talented individuals I have had the pleasure of meeting. I would like to end with a powerful quote from Omar that I believe sums up the motivations of the Rohingya youth—it speaks to their reasons for choosing to do an ethnographic theatre production and why this project means so much to them.

Omar: “They cannot take that away from us, they cannot go inside our hearts and say that you are not Rohingya, take that away from us. That's the one thing we can say we are. We can't say we're from Burma, we can't say we're from Bangladesh, we can't say we're from Canada, we can't say we're from anywhere! And we can't say we have anything. Because everything we had, we admire, and hold has been taken away from us. But one thing they couldn't take is saying Rohingya. They can't take that away from me or from anybody. Because no matter how badly you beat me to death, no matter how many people you kill of mine, how many family members you kill of mine, **you can't take that away from us.**”

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**APPENDIX A****Research Instruments****Interview Guide for MRP**

This interview is going to be filmed on this camera. Is that OK? If you don't want to be recorded, or want the recorder turned off at any time, just tell me and we'll turn it off. The interview is also going to be transcribed (i.e. we will type out all the stuff that you said) so we can write some reports and papers about what we have learned. Do you have any questions? Are you OK with this?

**Introduction**

Can you tell me your name, age and where you're from?

Tell me a little bit about yourself.

What is your passion/dream job?

**Migration & Identity**

What is your personal connection to Myanmar?

What nationality do you identify with most? (Burmese, Bengali, Canadian, etc.)

Can you tell me a little about your journey of coming to Canada?

How has life been for you and your family since you've been living in Canada?

What does it mean to be Rohingya?

**Theatre**

Why did you choose to get involved with this play?

How has the rehearsal process been for you? Do you enjoy working with the group?

What has been the most challenging part of being in this play? Most rewarding?

Why do you think it is important for others to know about this story?

What outcomes do you hope to have come out of this play?

Do you feel you've had the chance to tell your story?

If we did this again, would you want to do differently with this project?

Has this theatre production and process affected you in anyway? Good or bad?

Why do you think theatre is the right tool to tell your story?